The Enigma of Gogen Yamaguchi

by Mark Cramer

I was introduced to Goju-Kai in 1974 after having been in karate-do for three years and after having received my san-kyu in an Okinawan style. Immediately, I began hearing and reading stories about the enigmatic Gogen Yamaguchi who was the head of this Japanese organization. He was an almost legendary individual who was rumored to have superhuman mental and physical powers, and by some accounts, he was the legitimate successor of Mr. Chojun Miyagi. I was also told that it was by his efforts that the Goju system of karate-do had been spread around the world. As a twenty-three year old san-kyu, I was somewhat skeptical as I had heard contradictory information from some of my friends in the Okinawan styles. I began to wonder which of these accounts were accurate.
Last November, I was at dining and sharing libations with Mr. Yamakura, Mr. Galose, and a host of other GKK members. As a conversation developed at my end of the table that evening, I realized that Mr. Yamaguchi was still very much a mystery to me even though thirty-four years had elapsed since I had first heard the stories about him. I still did not know if the stories were accurate or fictionalized. Consequently, I decided to conduct some research in order to see if it would shine some light on the enigma surrounding Gogen Yamaguchi.

My researched took me into four areas. (1) Who was Mr. Gogen Yamaguchi? (2) What was the nature of his relationship with Mr. Chojun Miyagi, the founder of Goju Ryu? (3) Was there any substance to the claim of Mr. Yamaguchi’s superhuman powers? (4) Was he truly responsible for the spread of Goju around the world? I believed that finding the answers to these four questions could do a lot to end the mystery surrounding Mr. Yamaguchi.

WHO WAS GOGEN YAMAGUCHI?

Mr. Gogun Yamaguchi was born on January 20, 1909 on the island of Kyushu in southern Japan. He was one of ten children, and all six of the Yamaguchi boys practiced the martial arts. However, it appears as if the young Mr. Yamaguchi was exceptionally interested and talented in the martial ways, and he practiced Japanese fencing and karate-do. His training was intense, and Mr. Yamaguchi tells us that "I believe that I trained myself in the fundamental alertness of a cat in these early days." Even today, Mr. Yamaguchi is often referred to as The Cat.

Additionally, the young Mr. Yamaguchi was drawn to the spiritual side of life. "I longed for unseen and mysterious things and... I tried to talk to the Supernatural God... I realize now that what I am today has been deeply rooted in my childhood." Consequently, the early life of the young Mr. Yamaguchi was marked by an intense martial training and a deep spiritual longing.

I was a bit surprised to learn that "Gogen" was actually not the name given to Mr. Yamaguchi by his parents. "Yoshimi" was his given name, and it is still the name by which some Okinawan Goju Ryu masters refer to him. Mr. Yamaguchi tells us that he legally changed his name after the end of World War II, and that the alteration occurred at the desire of Mr. Chojun Miyagi. "I was greatly impressed when he requested that I change my name to Gogen (following the War, I legally registered my name as Gogen with the court in Kagoshima)." Consequently, "Yoshimi" Yamaguchi is known to us as Gogen Yamaguchi.

Mr. Yamaguchi attended and was expelled from Kansai University and developed a reputation for being a ruffian. He then entered Ritsumeikan University, but confessed that "I doubt that Ritsumeikan University would have admitted me if they knew about the ‘Rough Yamaguchi’ who was expelled form Kansai University." In 1932, Mr Yamaguchi graduated from Ritsumeikan, passed the Bar Examination, and became a lawyer.

After his graduation from the university and after the outbreak of war with China, Mr. Yamaguchi was persuaded to go to Manchuria by General Kanji Ishihara. There he served as "a mixture of administrator, trouble-shooter, spymaster, and undercover agent." Mr. Yamaguchi tells us that he agreed to move to Manchuria because General Ishihara desired "to make Manchuria a ‘Heavenly Land’ where Japanese, Chinese, Mongolians, and Koreans could live in peace and prosperity. He had been my friend since I became a student and I supported his views." However, the general’s ideals were not the reality of life, and "Manchuria was oppressed and ruthlessly exploited. For the native population, Manchuko [Manchuria] was anything but a heavenly land."

I am familiar with General Ishihara’s military actions and his radical views. It was he who conceived and planned every detail of the Manchurian Incident of 1931 where "Japanese troops of the Kwantung Army faked an attack upon themselves, and used this as a pretext to seize Manchuria." Additionally, the general predicted a war which would last up to thirty years between the East (led by Japan) and the West (led by the United States). He concluded that the war "would end in the annihilation of the West."

I found the closeness of the relationship between General Kanji Ishihara and Mr. Gogen Yamaguchi to be a bit surprising. It is possible that Mr. Yamaguchi did not know the full scope of General Ishihara’s radical views even

though the general had articulated his views as early as 1928 in "The Final World War Theory." However, one must consider that the association between the general and Mr. Yamaguchi occurred during a war, and history has shown me that both nations and people act differently during times of war and times of peace. Perhaps it is best to put their relationship in this historical perspective.

At the conclusion of World War II in1945, the Soviet Union invaded Manchuria and Mr. Yamaguchi became a prisoner of war. He was sent to a Soviet Gulag for two years where he suffered the harshness of inhumane conditions and cruel treatment. After he was released from Soviet captivity, Mr. Yamaguchi returned to Japan, but he became depressed over many of the social changes that had occurred since the end of the war. Mr. Yamaguchi decided to commit Seppuku (the type of self disembowelment that had been used by the warrior class of Feudal Japan). As he prepared himself for the final moment, he had a revelation. He had a mission in life – to contribute to the world by disseminating the Japanese martial arts. For the next four decades, "the development of Goju in Japan was the work of one man, Gogen Yamaguchi."

Throughout his life, Mr. Yamaguchi had a variety of occupations, experiences, and penchants. He was a lawyer, an undercover agent, a prisoner of war, and a karate master. We will also discover that he was a Shinto priest, a practitioner of yoga, and a profound mystic. Clearly, throughout his life, he was no ordinary person. In 1988 at the age of 79, he died in Tokyo, Japan.

WHAT WAS THE NATURE OF HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH MR. CHOJUN MIYAGI?

The nature of the relationship between Mr. Miyagi and Mr. Yamaguchi has long been the subject of debate. Whereas Mr. Yamaguchi makes several claims regarding Mr. Miyagi, a number of people including several Okinawan Goju Ryu masters refute those claims. Can the truth on these issues be found?

Mr. Yamaguchi tells us that he was named as the successor to Mr. Miyagi, the founder of Goju Ryu. We are told that Mr. Miyagi told him "Mr. Yamaguchi, you are well qualified to become the successor of Goju School Karate...I have nothing more to teach you... Thus...you must make a diligent effort to develop karate in Japan" These are certainly weighty words coming from the founder of Goju Ryu, and it appears as if Mr. Yamaguchi was designated as the successor to the Goju system.

However, Graham Noble tells us that Mr. Yamaguchi’s claim of successorship is disputed by many of Mr. Miyagi’s senior Okinawan students. "It irritates some of the Goju men on Okinawa to hear Yamaguchi described as Chojun Miyagi’s successor, since Miyagi was never in Japan for periods of longer than two or three months... In view of this, it may be doubted whether Yamaguchi ever learned the whole Goju system form Miyagi."

Additionally, Mr. Morio Higaonna of Okinawa tells us that after the death of Mr. Miyagi, "Eichi Miyazato claimed that Chojun Sensei had named him as successor" and that Mr. Miyazato was appointed by Mr. Miyagi’s widow to teach in the famous Garden Dojo in the Miyagi family home. Furthermore, we are also told by the Okinawan students at the Jundokan that "Eichi Miyazato Sensei is well known as the successor to Chojun Miyagi Sensei."

Consequently, we are left wondering whether Mr. Yamaguchi was actually appointed to be the successor of Mr. Chojun Miyagi, and whether he really possessed the depth of knowledge about Goju Ryu to become the successor of Mr. Miyagi. I believe that it is quite plausible that Mr. Miyagi intended for there to be more than one "successor" or people who were responsible for teaching and spreading Goju Ryu. In this manner he would increase the likelihood that the style that he founded would survive and be spread throughout the modern world.

Therefore, I would suggest that Mr. Yamaguchi was designated as the successor who was responsible for the development of Goju in Japan. Looking at Mr. Miyagi’s words "you must make a diligent effort to develop karate in Japan" one can certainly conclude that he assigned Mr. Yamaguchi to spread Goju in Japan. Perhaps Mr. Miyazato was designated as the successor of Goju in Okinawa.

In addressing the issue of the depth of knowledge of Mr. Yamaguchi, Graham Noble suggests that Mr. Yamaguchi did not learn the majority of his Goju from Mr. Miyagi. Instead, he learned "the complete range of Goju kata later from students of Miyagi such as Meitoku Yagi." However, Mr. Higaonna tells that the practice of teaching katas indirectly through other students was a common practice of Mr. Miyagi. "Before the war Miyagi taught one heishugata, Sanchin, and one kaishugata according to the needs and abilities of each student" and that the only way that students could learn another kaishugata was to learn it from another student. Therefore, there is nothing unusual about the manner in which Mr. Yamaguchi learned Goju; it was the same manner by which students in Okinawa learned Goju.

It appears as Mr. Yamaguchi very well could have been a successor to Mr. Miyagi and that his depth of knowledge would have been commensurate to those who had studied in Okinawa. The real issue may be over whether Mr. Miyagi intended there to be multiple successors.

Another issue is whether Mr. Miyagi awarded Mr. Yamaguchi a tenth dan. Whereas I could not find a specific reference

in Mr. Yamaguchi’s book claiming that he was in fact awarded any dan grade by Mr. Miyagi, many other authors and organizations have stated that Mr. Yamaguchi received a tenth dan from Mr. Miyagi. Conversely, Mr Higaonna tells us "Chojun Miyagi awarded ranks to no one, neither Okinawan nor Japanese." Can this glaring discrepancy be explained?

This discrepancy may be due to the fact that dan ranks were viewed differently in Japan and in Okinawa. Originally, Okinawans did not awarded dan grades in their systems of karate, but the Japanese saw them as a necessary part of a budo. Patrick McCarthy tells us that "For karate-jitsu to be accepted in mainland Japan, the Budokukai called for...[among other things]...the implementation of Kano Jigoro’s [the founder of Judo] dan-kyu system." Therefore, it is quite plausible that Mr. Yamaguchi assumed his tenth dan because he had been designated by Mr. Miyagi to spread the Goju system in Japan, and that this was something that Mr. Yamaguchi saw as being necessary to gain the acceptance of Goju by other Japanese martial artists.

I recently wrote Mr. Motoo Yamakura, Chairman of Goju-Ryu Karate-Do Kyokai, about the issue of Mr. Yamaguchi’s rank. His response supports the aforementioned conclusion. Mr. Yamakura stated "My guess is that Mr. Miyagi was not aware of the ranking system and probably did not care. So if Mr. Yamaguchi was chosen in any particular time to lead the art in Japan, it was not such a big deal what rank Mr. Yamaguchi held." It does not appear as if Mr. Yamaguchi did anything unusual; dan grades were common among the martial artists in mainland Japan, and Mr. Yamaguchi did what was customary.

WAS THERE ANY SUBSTANCE TO THE CLAIM OF MR. YAMAGUCHI’S SUPERHUMAN POWERS?

Mr. Gogen Yamaguchi is well known for performing a variety of yoga and Shinto rituals with the expressed purpose of increasing his spiritual awareness. Not only was he a Shinto priest, but at least sixty pages in his book are expressly dedicated to the subject Shintoism and yoga. Whereas it is well established that Mr. Yamaguchi engaged in a variety of activities with the intent of strengthening his spirit, the question becomes, did these activities give him superhuman mental and physical powers?

In an interview in 1977, Mr. Yamaguchi told the interviewer that "if you were to face me in combat, I would be able to tell in a second the strength of your Ki. Immediately, I would know if you were a good opponent. It is this quality and no other that has given me the name The Cat." I would suggest that the power that Mr. Yamaguchi claims to possess is interesting, but I would hardly classify it as a superhuman power.

Furthermore, I obtained a copy of the video "The Cat – Gogen Yamaguchi 10th Dan" and saw some old footage of him naked to the waist under a waterfall. As he stood under the falling water, he contorted his hands and fingers in various positions as he repeatedly raised them skyward. This, the commentator told us, was a manner by which Mr. Yamaguchi increased his spiritual awareness. This type of austerity training is a bit out of the ordinary, but does not enter into the realm of being superhuman.

Graham Noble tells us something much more extraordinary. He was viewing a film, "The Way of the Sword", and "Mr. Yamaguchi was shown sitting in front of a crystal ball. He performed various mudras (mystic hand movements) in the direction of the crystal ball, while doing breathing exercises. According to the narration, Yamaguchi uses the crystal ball to communicate with the spirits of fighters of the past and future. They give him secrets." If the narration is correct, and if Mr. Yamaguchi can in fact contact both the deceased and the unborn, then he truly possessed a superhuman power.

It is Peter Urban who has ascribed superhuman physical powers to Mr. Yamaguchi. Many years ago I read his book, Karate Dojo. In one of the chapters, he told his readers that while Mr. Yamaguchi was in Manchuria, he kicked, punched, and chocked an adult tiger to death. There are several problems with Mr. Urban’s account. First of all Mr. Yamaguchi never mentions this event in his autobiography. Additionally, Mr. James Genovese who trained with Mr. Yamaguchi in Japan insists that Mr. Yamaguchi denied that the event occurred; and finally, many wildlife experts do not believe that it is plausible for an unarmed human to kill an adult tiger. It is most likely that the accounts of Mr. Yamaguchi possessing superhuman physical powers are nothing more than urban legends.

I can not conclude that Mr. Yamaguchi possessed any superhuman powers. I have not been able to verify the assertion of the narrator of "The Way of the Sword" with any other sources, and the contention of the author of Karate Dojo has been directly refuted. It appears to me that Mr. Yamaguchi was a man who possessed a deep spiritual longing and engaged in a variety of activities that he believed would improve his spiritual well being.

WAS MR. YAMAGUCHI RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SPREAD OF GOJU AROUND THE WORLD?

Many people in karate-do have told us that Mr. Yamaguchi was responsible for the worldwide dissemination of the Goju system. Mr. Morio Higaonna tells us that "Yamaguchi Sensei went on to create the Goju Kai organization and was successful in spreading Goju Kai throughout Japan and the world." Additionally, Mr. Richard Stamper, the Assistant Chairman of Goju-Ryu Karate-Do Kyokai, remembers Mr. Yamaguchi as a "showman who brought a lot of attention to karate and Goju." Graham Noble supports this opinion stating Mr. Yamaguchi had "charisma" and was a "semi-

legendary" figure in karate-do. "He always wore traditional Japanese dress and also wore his hair long which made him look like some Yamabushi (mountain warrior) from days gone by, transported incongruously to the Tokyo suburbs." His actions and manner of dress caught the attention of the mass media and this did a lot to promote Goju around the world.

This view of Mr. Yamaguchi is not without controversy. The leaders of the Jundokan tell us that "Eichi Miyazato is well known...for establishing the Jundokan, and his tireless effort to develop and expand the Okinawa Goju Ryu Karate-do around the world." However, Mr. Miyazato was never flamboyant and never drew a lot of attention to what he did. He worked quietly to promote Goju Ryu and did not receive copious amounts of attention in the media.

Both of these gentleman have contended to be the successor of Mr. Chojun Miyagi, and both of them have supporters stating that they are responsible for the worldwide propagation of the Goju system. I believe that both are correct. As was mentioned previously, it is plausible that Mr. Miyagi intended for there to be more than a single successor and that he did this intentionally to ensure that Goju would survive and prosper in the modern world. It seems obvious to me that both of these fine teachers succeeded by using different methods, and they spread the Goju system throughout Okinawa, Japan, and the world.

THE ENIGMA CRACKED

After conducting my research, I am more certain of who Mr. Gogen Yamaguchi was and who he was not. He was a man who, from an early age, was captivated by the martial ways, and he was also an individual who was caught up in the politics of the second World War. He was a man who possessed no superhuman powers, but was a person who had a deep spiritual longing. Certainly, he was one of the men who was given the responsibility of spreading Goju around the globe, and he accomplished this in a manner which grabbed our attention. It is obvious that he was no ordinary individual.

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